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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of two studies at a large mid-Atlantic university that examined the height/success paradigm within the context of the university settings. Specifically, are the trends observed among taller persons in police and sales work equally valid for university professors? A random sample of faculty (N=90), revealed that academics are taller than the average American of their age and gender. The monotonic trend anticipated between height and academic rank revealed that assistant professors are 1.24 inches taller, associate professors are 1.50 inches taller, and professors are 1.97 inches taller than the average individual of their age and gender. Another study, using a sample of department chairmen (N=52), found that they are taller by 2.14 inches than the American of their age and gender. From examining the mechanisms by which taller persons rise to positions of authority, it was found that chairmen do not achieve that post at a younger age, they do not spend a greater proportion of their academic careers as chairmen, and they are no more likely to be hired from outside as from inside the university. Viewed from an interactionist perspective, these findings corroborate the idea that height is important not in itself but because it is a predictor of social dominance. Contains 24 references. (GLR)

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Height as a Measure of Success in Academe

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Competitively selected paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Atlanta, October 31 - November 3, 1991.

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Running head: HEIGHT IN ACADEME

ABSTRACT

Two studies examined height and academic success at a large mid-Atlantic university. A random sample of faculty (N = 90), revealed that academics are taller than the average American of their age and gender (χ^2 = 31.56; df = 2; p < .001). The monotonic trend anticipated between height and academic rank revealed that assistant professors are 1.24 inches taller, associate professors are 1.50 inches taller, and professors are 1.97 inches taller than the average individual of their age and gender. Study II, using a sample of department chairmen (N = 52), found that they are taller by 2.14 inches than the American of their age and gender (t (51) = 5.53; p < .001). These data, when included with the faculty heights, approached significance for height and rank (r = .115; df = 134; p = .09). Examining the mechanisms by which taller persons rise to positions of authority, it was found that chairmen do not achieve that post at a younger age, they do not spend a greater proportion of their academic careers as chairmen and they are no more likely to be hired from outside as from inside the university. Viewed from an interactionist perspective, these findings corroborate the idea that height is important not in itself but because it is a predictor of social dominance.

Height as a Measure of Success in Academe

Is biology destiny? Are there physical attributes which subtly shape the quality and frequency of opportunities in our lives? At least in the case of stature, the answer seems to be yes. In a recent review of height and occupational success, Hensley and Cooper (1987) surveyed over 50 years of research documenting a strong proclivity favoring those who are tall. The perception seems to exist that taller individuals are somehow more capable, able or competent; consequently, this perception leads to taller persons being disproportionately selected for jobs. In sharp contrast, however, there is no evidence that height leads to enhanced job performance. Hensley and Cooper (1987) reviewed three occupational categories: police, sales and academia. The data for both police work and sales precisely mirror the results described. The third area, academe, was less clear. While a number of studies have focused on height perceptions in university teaching (Dannenmaier & Thumin, 1964; Hensley & Angoli, 1980; Wilson, 1968), the link between academic occupational success and height is sparse (Hensley & Cooper, 1987). It is the lack of empirical data in higher education which the present study seeks to address.

Within the context of a university setting, then, the aim is to examine the height-success paradigm. Specifically, are the same trends observed among taller persons in police and sales work equally valid for university professors. Are those who are taller more likely to succeed as a university professor than their shorter counterparts?

In a sense, it can be argued that being a college professor is, per se, a success story. A high status occupation in a self-monitored work atmosphere is undoubtedly the envy of many. But, first, how does one get to be a college professor and, second, what does being a professor have to do with height? High on any list of answers to the first question would be the attribute of intelligence. In order to become a professor, one must be able to survive the intellectual rigors of the educational system. Closely following this realization, is the answer to the second question. It is well documented that height is positively associated with intelligence (Douglas, Ross & Simpson, 1965; Klein, Freeman, Kagan, Yarbrough & Havicht, 1972; McManus & Mascie-Taylor, 1983; Pollitt, Mueller & Leibel, 1982; Susanne, 1980; Wilson, Hammer, Duncan, Dornbusch, Ritter, Hintz, Gross & Rosenfeld, 1986). It can therefore be predicted (1) that college professors, as a group, are taller than the average American of their age and gender.

Reasoning from past research, the data from the studies of police officers may offer some clues to aid this investigation. Even though height seems to have little impact on the actual job performance of police (White & Bloch, 1975), there is a strong perception that shorter police officers cause poor morale, more discipline problems and are the source of internal departmental complaints (Lester & Sheehan, 1980). Obviously, such perceptions, if they are systematic, lead to slower promotions or perhaps even to the termination of a police officer's career. Assuming that the same sort of perceptual dynamic might affect the academic world, it might

be expect that (2) height is monotonically related to academic rank; in turn, assistant, associate and full professors should be progressively taller.

METHOD

The organization chosen for this study was a large land grant mid-Atlantic university of 20,000 plus students and 1,600 plus academic faculty. From the 64 departments of the university, a random sample of 30 departments was chosen. From each of the 30 departments, one full professor, one associate professor and one assistant professor was randomly selected to be interviewed.

Unfortunately, this random sample of 90 college teachers included only seven women: five assistant professors and two associate professors. Because of the small sample size and because the psychological dynamics of height may be substantially different for females (Deck, 1968; Hensley, in press; Hensley & Angoli, 1980; Lerner & Moore,1974; Tom & Shevell, 1986), their responses were dropped from the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of this investigation was examined by determining the average height for the age cohort of each professor (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1982) and calculating the deviation above or below that average.

As anticipated, college professors are substantially taller than the average American of their age and gender. These data leave little doubt that the relationship found between intelligence and height found in

Insert Table 1 about here

previous studies is powerfully displayed among college professors (χ^2 = 31.56; df = 2; p < .001).

Turning to the second hypothesis, there is a mixed reaction. As predicted, there is a steady increase in height deviations above the norm with each successive academic rank. Assistant professors are 1.24 inches taller (3.15 cm) than the average man of their age cohort, associate professors are 1.50 inches taller (3.81 cm), and full professors 1.97 inches taller (5.00 cm). On the other hand, these deviations are not sufficiently powerful to achieve statistically significant levels (F (2,80) = 1.53). Apparently, after having applied de facto partials for age, gender and intelligence, insufficient variance remains to demonstrate the predicted relationship. The hypothesis that height increases with academic rank remains interesting but the data are not totally convincing.

In fact, it is possible that these three academic ranks might have randomly fallen into the predicted monotonic order. It would be far more impressive if another independent sample were to corroborate these preliminary findings. In addition to this doubt, there are a host of additional questions which might also be explored in an additional investigation. These concerns prompted the second study to be reported here.

STUDY II

The goal of this second study was to reconfirm the findings of study I and, in addition, to explore some potential concomitants of academic occupational success. If it is the case that taller than average persons seem to occupy important positions, how did they get there? Thus far, the research indicates only that taller persons seem to be in desirable positions; how they got there is open to question. The most systematic extension of the data would appear to be the position of department head. Moving from the normal academic ranks, the next logical promotion for a college professor is to assume administrative control of the department.[1] And, following the logic of study I, it is hypothesized that departmental chairpersons are taller than assistant, associate and full professors.

Second, if being taller bestows an advantage on a person's professional advancement, then the number of years in higher education before achieving the position of department head should be less as the height of the individual increases. Naturally, the rapidity of this advancement should be independent of age. No matter what the age of a person in beginning an academic career, the taller individual should become a chairperson sooner than a shorter individual and should therefore occupy the position of department head for a greater percentage of their professional life. Thus, does the proportion of one's academic career spent as department chairperson increase with height?

Third, if the advantage of height is constant across a lifetime, then

taller persons might become department chairpersons chronologically sooner than their shorter counterparts. It is therefore reasonable to ask if taller persons become department chairpersons at a younger age than shorter persons?

Finally, there is research which suggests that the psychological impressiveness of height may diminish over time (Hensley and Angoli, 1980). If the impact of height decays with successive interactions, individuals hired from outside the university to fill the position of a departmental chairperson should be, on average, taller than individuals hired from inside the university. This observation is akin to, "the prophet is not without honor; save in his own country." Thus, the hypothesis is that chairpersons hired from outside the university are taller than chairpersons hired internally.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for this study was defined as all the chairpersons at the same university described in study I. All 64 chairpersons were contacted for interviews. Two chairpersons declined; seven more were out of town, out of the country or otherwise unavailable. Only three females were chairpersons and this number was too small to allow effective analysis. Thus, the sample was reduced to 52.

RESULTS

As expected, academic chairmen are substantially taller than might be expected by chance alone (t (51) = 5.53; $p < .001$). The 52 male

chairmen are 2.14 inches taller (5.08 cm) than average for their age cohort with 40 of them being above average, 4 at the average and 8 below the average. In this study, the average height for a chairman was 5 feet, 11 inches (180 cm). Thus, these data continue the monotonic trend already found for professorial ranks and now approaches significance (r = .115; df = 134; p = .09).

The second hypothesis postulated that the rapidity of career advancement, regardless of the age at which one began that career, would be faster for taller men than for shorter men. The correlation between the deviation of height from the norm and the proportion of years spent as chairman fails to support this expectation (r = -.03; df = 51; p is n. s.).

The third hypothesis anticipated that taller individuals would have been appointed to the chairmanship at a younger age than shorter individuals. Again, the relationship between height deviation and age disconfirms this expectation (r = .07; df = 51; p is n. s.).

Finally, a "decay effect" was expected in the psychological impact of height such that persons hired as chairmen from outside the university would be taller than persons hired from inside the university. This is not the case (t (50) = .73; p is n. s.). Those persons coming from outside (N = 26) as chairmen are 2.00 inches taller (5.08 cm) than average while those hired from inside (N = 26) are 2.27 inches taller (5.77 cm) than average.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These results strongly suggest that tall persons get to be university professors and that the tallest of the tall become chairmen. Yet taller men

do not seem to achieve the chairmanship at a younger age, they do not spend a greater proportion of their academic careers as chairmen and they are no more likely to come from outside the university as from within.

At least part of the failure to find any explanatory answers may lie in the restricted intelligence range inherent in a population of university professors. In a sample of only university professors, everyone is bright. Selecting only university professors for this study, imposes a de facto partial for intelligence and it is well documented that height is positively associated with intelligence (Douglas et al., 1965; Klein et al., 1972; McManus & Mascie-Taylor, 1983; Pollitt et al., 1982; Susanne, 1980; Wilson et al., 1986). By restricting the intelligence range, the height-intelligence variance has been eliminated. Moreover, partials have also be applied for gender and age. While these controls may have clarified the results presented, they may have also reduced the job related variance of height in academe to an inconsequential level. Viewed in this light, the findings which have emerged in spite of these controls are all the more impressive and thought provoking.

Perhaps the most useful line of analysis lies in understanding the process by which a chairperson is selected. By the time the field has been narrowed to the final few candidates, any one of them could probably do an adequate job. Understanding the fact that different candidates possess different strengths and weaknesses, the final decision becomes a question of the strengths desired vs. the weaknesses which will be tolerated. It is not a case of selecting the qualified candidate and eliminating the

unqualified candidates; they are probably all qualified in different senses. Clearly, then, if the final few candidates are all qualified, other more subtle attributes must begin to exert an influence beyond their suspected importance. While a great many issues are raised when hiring a department head, certainly one of the paramount questions is: which of these candidates will do the most capable job of representing the departmental best interests to deans, vice-presidents and provosts?

One answer to the selection process dilemma has been provided by an interactionist perspective linking height and social dominance (Eisenberg, 1937; Maclay & Knipe, 1972; Shaffer, 1964; Strayer & Strayer, 1980; Weisfeld & Beresford, 1982) as well as a comprehensive survey of height and leadership (Bass, 1981). The most recent, and perhaps clearest, example of this general area (Schwartz, Tesser & Powell, 1982) investigated the nonverbal impact of gender, lateral position, anterior-posterior position, standing vs. sitting and elevation (height). By an extremely wide margin, elevation (height) emerged as the most influential variable of a socially dominate person in an interaction situation. In fact, height alone accounted for just over a fifth of the total variance in the study ($\omega^2 = .21$).

Understanding that a departmental faculty may highly value a person who is socially dominant without being socially aggressive, height becomes an extremely desirable job trait. In this sense, height is not simply a desirable adjunct quality for a chairmanship---it is a job related attribute.

It is probably worth noting at this point that a college faculty is unlikely to be consciously aware of the psychological link between height and social dominance. In fact, if confronted with the possibility that their hiring decision was based, even in part, on height and social dominance most college faculty would probably deny such an occurrence. Regardless, it seems reasonable to assume that the educational attainment and intelligence of college professors does not render them immune from the same psychological dynamics affecting others.

All this, of course, must be viewed within the present context. The explanation advanced here--even if it is totally accurate--may apply only to males. We know nothing of the desirable attributes which may operate for female department heads. Only future research will be able to explore that area.

In summary, it may now be said that height, insofar as university professors are concerned, appears to be an important attribute in that occupation. Moreover, prior research suggests that for university departmental chairmen it may not be height per se which is important but the unconscious psychological link with exists between height and social dominance. If this assertion is accurate, it would be one explanation of why individuals in many occupations who stand head and shoulders above others also occupy the chair at the head of the table.

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Footnotes

[1]While the progression from assistant professor to departmental chair may seem a reasonable to the lay person, considerable discussion could be generated among academics concerning the "promotion" to departmental chair--especially among those who have served as departmental chair. For the moment, we propose to leave the debate concerning the rewards and frustrations of directing an academic department until another time.

Table 1

Deviations Above and Below Average Height

by

Academic Rank

	Rank		
Height	Assistant	Associate	Professor
Above Average	18	21	23
Below Average	6	4	4